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# Heroes and villains: Strutt's Australia

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# Heroes and villains: Strutt's Australia

*It is lamentable to see men of true genius wasting their powers on twaddling little sujets de genre when the pages of history offer such an abundance of splendid subjects ...*

**Cover image:**  
William Strutt,  
*Black Thursday,*  
*February 6th, 1851,*  
1864, (detail)  
oil on canvas,  
106.5 x 343 cm,  
State Library  
Victoria

**Gatefold image:**  
William Strutt,  
study for  
*Black Thursday,*  
*February 6th, 1851,*  
c. 1862, (detail)  
pencil and wash,  
22.5 x 112.7 cm,  
Rex Nan Kivell  
Collection,  
National Library  
of Australia

So wrote English artist William Strutt to James Smith, art critic for *The Argus* newspaper, in 1861. Except for a stint of 18 months in New Zealand, Strutt had been living in and around Melbourne since 1850 and, in that time, the area had undergone an incredible transformation. When Strutt arrived, the gold rush was still a year away, Victoria was still part of New South Wales, and the population of the 'then unpretending but prosperous city of Melbourne' was around 20,000. Eleven years later, when Strutt wrote this letter to Smith, Melbourne had a population of more than 125,000, was the capital of a new colony – Victoria, – and was one the richest cities in the world. The pages of history were overflowing with significant events and a new catalogue of Australian 'heroic' archetypes such as bushrangers, explorers and diggers were cementing themselves in the Australian consciousness. Strutt wanted to transfer this drama to heroic, monumental canvases.





William Strutt, self-portrait at Atelier Drolling, Paris, c. 1840, (detail) pencil and wash, 12.1 x 14 cm, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia

William Strutt, portrait of John Pascoe Fawkner, founder of Melbourne, 1856, oil on canvas, 61.3 x 51.2 cm, National Library of Australia

Born in England in 1825, William Strutt had the right pedigree to become a painter. His father and grandfather were both artists and Strutt himself trained in Paris, then the centre of Western art. He began at the atelier of Michel-Martin Drolling in 1838, and was later accepted at the *École des Beaux-Arts* where he was instructed by stalwarts of the French academic system, Horace Vernet and Paul Delaroche. The French Academy promoted a hierarchy of genres in which history painting – large, dramatic canvases of narrative scenes – was considered the highest form of art. Its house style at the time was the *juste milieu* (middle way), a conservative compromise between the restraint and rigour of neoclassicism and the emotional charge of romanticism. After seven years in the academic system, Strutt emerged as a superb draughtsman and renderer of the human figure, with an ability to compose complex narrative works.



### An antipodean adventure

After a modest start to his career, spent mostly illustrating books, and a period of ill health, Strutt decided to ‘plunge into the unknown’. At the age of 24, he set out for Australia, arriving in Melbourne on 5 July 1850. Strutt quickly found work as an illustrator but it was, as art historian Elisabeth Findlay notes, ‘the lucrative commissions for large-scale portraits that allowed him to survive in the colony’. He painted portraits of John Pascoe Fawkner (pioneer, politician and the self-styled father of Melbourne), Governor Sir Edward Macarthur (the son of wool baron John Macarthur), Sir John O’Shanassy (the second premier of Victoria), the Native Police Corps of Port Phillip, and the fabled explorer Robert O’Hara Burke.

In addition to painting the great and the good of the young colony, Strutt also witnessed and recorded some of the most important events in Victoria’s early history. He



William Strutt,  
*The little wanderers*,  
1865, watercolour,  
14.7 x 19.2 cm,  
National Library  
of Australia

William Strutt, study  
for *Bushrangers*,  
*Victoria, Australia*,  
1852, 1886,  
pencil and wash,  
52.7 x 36.3 cm,  
Rex Nan Kivell  
Collection,  
National Library  
of Australia

depicted the celebrations surrounding the separation of Victoria from New South Wales in 1851, life on the Victorian goldfields, and the training of the Victorian Volunteer Corps at Werribee in 1861. With the support of Fawcner, Strutt had also planned to produce large oils of both the opening of the Victorian Legislative Council in 1851 and of Parliament House in 1856. Strutt attended both openings to make the required preparatory drawings but both times, to his frustration, the funds necessary to complete such large works could not be raised. He extensively documented the Great Victorian Expedition, led by Burke, at Royal Park in 1860 before it left Melbourne on their heroic but ultimately doomed odyssey across the continent. Strutt recorded 'everything likely to be useful. No detail, in a word, was neglected', perceiving 'at once that this was a subject to paint'. He would depict it on a large canvas, but not for another 50 years.

### Returning home

In 1862 Strutt returned to England with his young family, and for the next 50 years carved out an unremarkable career as an artist and teacher. He never returned to Australia but did eventually complete some large historical works on colonial themes which have become his most memorable pictures. Melancholic, even apocalyptic, the works completed in England are darker, emphasising the dangers of life in Australia, from the perils of the bush and the destructive power of cataclysmic bushfires, to the terror of facing bushrangers on remote roads.

The first and largest of his historical works – *Black Thursday, February 6th, 1851*, painted in 1864 – was inspired by a devastating bushfire that consumed Victoria. Strutt worked for three years on his magnum opus: an epic panorama featuring terrified crowds of people and animals running for their lives. *Black Thursday* was praised in the English press, yet took decades to



William Strutt,  
*Bushrangers*,  
Victoria, Australia,  
1852, 1887,  
oil on canvas,  
75.7 x 156.6 cm,  
University of  
Melbourne Art  
Collection, gift  
of the Russell and  
Mab Grimwade  
Bequest 1973

find a buyer. Strutt's next large colonial work – *Bushrangers*, Victoria, Australia 1852, painted in 1887 – was also based on a real-life incident which took place during his time in Australia: the bailing up of a group of people on St Kilda Road. Extensive preparatory sketches of both works have survived, providing valuable insight into how Strutt composed the pictures.

Strutt's last big Australian canvas was *The burial of Burke*, painted in 1911. In 1886 Dr William Gilbee, a former trustee, left a bequest to the National Gallery of Victoria for the purpose of funding a large memorial painting based on the death of Burke and Wills. Strutt desperately wanted the commission but it was awarded in 1901 to John Longstaff, an Australian artist living in England. Disappointed, Strutt went ahead with his own version, which was based on the material he collected half a century earlier. It was Strutt's last significant work on an Australian subject. He died, aged 89, four years after completing it.

### Strutt's legacy

That someone with Strutt's training and ability should visit Victoria 'during a decade so significant in her history' is, art historian Heather Curnow has posited, 'a fortunate coincidence'. Other talented artists worked in Australia during the 1850s and early 1860s, but Strutt's ability to draw figures and direct large, complex compositions differentiated him from many of his colonial contemporaries. His pictures are distinctive and ambitious, a rare example of the intersection of French academic training with Australian colonial subject matter. Strutt wanted to create epic pictures for what he saw as an age rich 'with splendid subjects'. He may have been frustrated by a failure to secure commissions for large canvases, but several of his smaller paintings, prints and drawings have a grandeur and sense of history seldom found in Australian art at that time.



William Strutt,  
*The burial of Burke*,  
1911, oil on canvas,  
122.0 x 204.0 cm,  
State Library  
Victoria

Decades after his death both *Black Thursday* and *The burial of Burke* would find a home in the Melbourne Public Library, now State Library Victoria. In 2016, *Heroes and villains: Strutt's Australia* reunites these works with other paintings, sketches and prints from major Australian collections. Together these works constitute the most comprehensive exhibition of Strutt's Australian work mounted in more than 30 years.

### **Matthew Jones**

Exhibition Curator

### **References**

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- George Mackaness (ed.), 1979, *The Australian journal of William Strutt, A.R.A., 1850–1862*, vols 1 and 2, Review Publications, Dubbo, NSW
- William Strutt, letter to James Smith dated 25 October 1861, from 'James Smith Papers', ML MSS. 212/1, Mitchell Library

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Details available at  
[slv.vic.gov.au/strutts-australia](http://slv.vic.gov.au/strutts-australia).

## Acknowledgements

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